

# THE RINGTONE DIALECTIC

ECONOMY AND CULTURAL FORM

SUMANTH GOPINATH

**By Vincent Meelberg**

Do you remember [this sound](#)? For a very short while in the mid-2000's this sound was the most popular ringtone among (male) teenagers. The rate at which this ringtone gained its popularity was astonishing, as was the time it took teenagers to replace this ringtone with the next sound that became popular. For a moment, Crazy Frog entered our public sound space, but its popularity quickly waned.

In his book *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form*, Sumant Gopinath investigates the rise and fall of Crazy Frog and other ringtones. More specifically, he sets out to examine the ringtone “[...] as a means of understanding a spatial and temporal totality, a world system and a global conjuncture” (xiii). Ringtones, Gopinath explains, is a digital commodity, and as such part of the set of transformations in the music industry that result from the digitization of sound. And, as with most digital developments, the music industry initially did not recognize the economic potential of ringtones, instead left it to others to create ringtones. Apart from suing those who infringed their copyrights the music industry was simply not interested in ringtones. Gopinath obviously is, and by focusing on a micro-industry such as ringtone production he expects to be able to articulate causal relationships between culture and economy. As a consequence, he is primarily interested in the socio-economical aspects of ringtones, rather than their cultural impact, even though he does address this impact as well.

Gopinath also calls his book a study of personalization. Ringtones are a means of personalization through the customization of one's own digital commodities, and through this customization people can create their own (sonic) identity. An identity that seems to change rather often, considering the rate at which people tend, or perhaps more precisely, tended (as customized ringtones already seem to be a thing of the past), to change their ringtone. So the question that the author asks, "How much can you charge people for things that are more or less worthless?" (xiv), appears to be: quite a lot, relatively speaking, as long as it in some way or another elicits the feeling that it can contribute to the creation of one's identity.

The book is organized into four parts and an Epilogue. Part 1, consisting of chapter 1, discusses the technical and economic structure of the global ringtone industry. This part has a strong historical focus, as the development of ringtones from monophonic synthesizer lines to digital sound files, as well as the economic consequences of this development, are addressed.

Part 2 focuses on sociocultural practices that surround ringtones. In chapter 2 the crafting of monophonic and polyphonic ringtones are discussed. Chapter 3 addresses the perhaps surprising relation between ringtones and Western classical music, as many of the synthesized ringtones were melodies derived from classical works. The manner in which ringtones are used in contemporary composed music and sound art installations is discussed in chapter 4.

Part 3 of the book is devoted to case studies: Crazy Frog (chapter 5), political ringtones (chapter 6), and the practice of independent original ringtone composition (chapter 7). Part 4 investigates how ringtones, both as sound and as a theme, are used in cinema (chapter 8) and pop music (chapter 9). The book concludes with an Epilogue in which Gopinath links ringtones to more recent developments such as mobile music and the cloud.

Although it was fascinating to read about the development, and subsequent fall, of the ringtone industry, the most interesting parts of the book were those where Gopinath discusses the cultural aspects related to ringtones. Ringtones, Gopinath maintains, are aestheticized signals. Their function is to indicate, by means of sound, that the owner of the mobile phone is receiving a phone call. A simple beep would suffice to accomplish this task. Nevertheless, many phone users prefer to use another sound to indicate this, one that is aesthetically more pleasing. A Bach excerpt, for example.

As Gopinath explains, such ringtones can be considered as contributing to the reanimation of classical music. Classical music, once considered as a so-called form of "high art," has become part of global mass culture since its adoption by ringtone producers. Interestingly, however, one of the main reasons classical tunes were used as ringtones, both in Eastern and Western countries, was not because of their aesthetic qualities or "high art" aura, but as a result of the practical limitations of the monophonic sound chips that were used in the earliest generations of mobile phones. These chips were not able to play other tonalities than the Western tonal system, which is relatively simple compared to, say, Arab tonalities, at least from a computational point of view. Moreover, classical music is to a large extent redundant, i.e. a classical composition can be reduced to a [single, monophonic melody](#) while still being recognizable as that particular composition. Ultimately, Gopinath asserts, such ringtones do not reproduce music. Instead, they represent music.

Synthesized ringtones may also evoke feelings of nostalgia. This so-called ringtone nostalgia does not only occur when for instance old pop songs, such as those of [the Beatles](#) or [ABBA](#), are used. The synthesized sounds themselves are also sounds of the past. The timbre of such ringtones refer to [synthesizers](#) and [games](#) of the early 1980's, and therefore, Gopinath suggests, may evoke nostalgic feelings. Monophonic ringtones, lastly, also refer to the past as these sounds belong to the 1990's, the period in which these ringtones were first introduced, to be quickly replaced by polyphonic ringtones and finally sound files as soon as technology allowed this. Ringtone nostalgia thus clearly is technological nostalgia.

This is the main reason why the use of ringtones in contemporary composed music, such as Salvatore Sciarrino's [Archaeologia del telefono](#) (2005) and sound art installations such as *Telephony* (2000) by Allison Craighead and Jon Thomson, were considered novelties in the time they premiered, but soon sounded "old-fashioned," as the ringtones used in these works are so strongly associated with a specific period. Moreover, every phone can now sound like an orchestra, as composer Golan Levin explains in *The Ringtone Dialectic*. As a consequence, it would make no sense to create a new work in which contemporary ringtones are incorporated. Every sound can act as a ringtone now, and therefore the ringtone as a specific sonic genre has essentially gone extinct. As a result, Gopinath's book is a historical study on sounds that, for a relatively short period, dominated our sonic environment.